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ABSTRACT

The problems now confronting public education in the cities represent some of the major reasons for advocating the voucher system. This report identifies many of these problems, examines the concept of educational vouchers, and raises some policy and research issues that should be considered before such a system is tried. The author outlines a model of a public education voucher system to be used in a pilot demonstration. He discusses the impact of the system on decentralization, competition and quality, alienation and apathy, accountability, innovation and experimentation, and equality of educational opportunity. (JF)

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EDUCATIONAL VOUCHERS - SOME POLICY ISSUES

Educational vouchers--few issues in education raise so many tempers and are so poorly understood.

To begin with, what does the term mean, beyond a slip of paper which goes with a child to the school of his family's choice, used to pay for the child's education? Can the school determine admission standards, selecting those pupils it wants? Does the family really have viable alternatives? Will the concept result in the diminution of public education or will it make education more responsive and therefore more truly public? Will vouchers increase competition among schools, and if so, will the result be a better service? Or, will competition force schools to become a bunch of hucksters bent on making extravagant claims to peddle their questionable wares?

These are some of the policy questions. It is important that we face them and deal with them honestly. While innovation and openness are attitudes that we hold dear, this Nation does have a viable, though not perfect, public school system which should not be subjected to drastic change without rigorous examination of the very real public policy implications of proposed changes.

A good deal has been written already on the idea of educational vouchers. The idea is often seen as an attack on our system of public education, especially by those responsible for maintaining public education. School board members, for example, see nothing good about the voucher system, according to an American School Board Journal (October 1970, p. 32) survey. It is seen rather as a way to remove resources and decisions about where children go to school from the public sector to the private sector. Private and parochial school forces tend to support the idea.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the concept of educational vouchers, and to raise some policy and research issues that need to be considered before such a system is tried. In the discussion which follows the problems of education in the cities will be the focus, for it is here where the voucher system has the greatest chance for success, and it is here where public education is in the deepest trouble.

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Paper prepared for the Accountability Conference of the Pennsylvania State Education Association Cabinet of Presidents, January 21-23, 1971, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania by Dr. James E. Mauch, Director of the Office of Research and Field Services, University of Pittsburgh.

The problems which confront public education in the cities are one of the major causes for advocacy of the voucher system. The breakdown of the historic principle of common schools, or at the secondary level, comprehensive schools, is an example. These schools have operated, if at all, most effectively in smaller towns and in the rural areas where residential distributions allowed a single common school to serve all social classes and races. In theory this meant that they received a similar quality of education, and received the benefits of going through an educational experience with all of the groups in the community.

Of all institutions, none in our history has been considered a more important equalizer than free, tax-supported common schools open to all. They were to provide a place where the children of rich and poor, and of native and immigrant parents, could come together and overcome their prejudice.

Arthur Mann, "A Historical Overview: The Lumpenproletariat, Education and Compensatory Action," in The Quality of Inequality: Urban and Suburban Schools (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1968), pp. 9-26.

Because of the social, economic and racial segregation which exists in the metropolitan areas, this principle has operated less and less effectively as urban areas have changed and grown.

The common school died in the modern city, and with it the hope of achieving very soon equality of educational opportunity. The affluent whites generally gave up and removed themselves from encounter with the public schools. Those who are left are stuck with the fairly homogeneous neighborhood school--in some cases, though in dwindling numbers, still maintained as high status schools. In terms of academic achievement levels these are the "best" schools. But they lack a major ingredient of a democratic school structure--students from low income and minority group families. They prosper to a limited degree while the rest of the city suffers.

Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. "A Profile of The Large City High School." Vol. 55, No. 351, January 1971, p. 95

The NASSP survey of Large City High Schools conducted under the auspices of secondary school principals found that in large city high schools there is probably more and deeper segregation by socio-economic and ethnic groups today than 10-20 years ago. Certainly there is a high degree of concentration of students of one race in one social class in a given school. From this one might expect that some degree of specialization to meet conditions surrounding particular schools might develop. Very little. On the

whole, the various schools of a city are remarkably similar to each other.

Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, "A Profile of The Large City High School."
Vol. 55, No. 351, January 1971.

What is said about large city high schools, drawing thousands of students from a wide area, is even truer of elementary schools serving a limited number of city blocks. Under these circumstances it is hard to see the schools operating--in the words of Horace Mann--as the balance-wheel of the social machinery.

If the schools do reflect neighborhood differences, and even accentuate them, they generate problems. One of the grave problems with the neighborhood schools in the cities, of course, is that in the poorest neighborhoods and poorest schools little is demanded of the children and indeed there are few models of high performance in such schools. There is now more than enough evidence of the inferior quality of these schools.

Kenneth Clark, Dark Ghetto (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 111-129.

The Coleman study basically agrees. It found that in a comparison of Negro students (having similar family backgrounds) in lower class and largely segregated schools with those in middle class, and often integrated schools, the former get higher grades than the latter, but their performance on standardized tests is lower. In other words, a student in a lower class school is awarded more highly for lower performance and not as much is demanded of him.

The separate--even segregated--education affects student performance in other ways. It should be clear by now that going to school with other children whose vocabulary is larger than one's own helps the creation of a larger vocabulary. Sitting next to a child who is performing at a high level provides a challenge to better performance. The psychological environment may be less comfortable, but nevertheless the normal human being in a challenging environment rises to the challenge. This, of course, is no news to the parents who are careful about selecting their children's school--where they have a choice. They want to know what kind of children go to that school and how well they do.

In short, there is by this time a good deal of evidence that schools have their effects through providing a social environment that is more demanding, or less demanding and stimulating. The results of the Coleman report also indicate that this heterogeneity of race and heterogeneity of family educational background can increase the achievement of children from weak educational backgrounds without adverse effect on children from strong educational backgrounds.

James S. Coleman, "Toward Open Schools," in The Public Interest (Fall, 1967).

Thus, the lack of choice in the assignment of children to schools, which is characteristic of large city school systems, has contributed to the inequality of educational opportunity. Schoolmates are usually rather homogeneous in economic and educational backgrounds, especially in large urban areas, and this homogeneity works to the disadvantage of those children whose family's educational resources are meager.

Unequal schooling in itself is not a bad principle if we recognize individual differences as well as group differences among children who come to school. It is, after all, not equal schools, but schooling that equalizes that should be our goal. In fact, however, the schools in the urban areas have tended too much to reflect the neighborhoods they serve. In doing so, they have tended to perpetuate social, economic and racial differences in the population and therefore tended to perpetuate inequalities.

On the basis of his investigations, Kenneth Clark puts it this way:

The class and social organization of American public schools is consistently associated with a lower level of educational efficiency in the less privileged schools. This lower efficiency is expressed in terms of the fact that the schools attended by Negro and poor children have less adequate educational facilities than those attended by more privileged children. Teachers tend to resist assignments in Negro and other underprivileged schools and generally function less adequately in these schools. Their morale is generally lower; they are not adequately supervised; they tend to see their students as less capable of learning. The parents of the children in these schools are usually unable to bring about any positive changes in the conditions of these schools.

Clark concludes that:

Given these conditions, American public schools have become significant instruments in the blocking of economic mobility and in the intensification of class distinctions rather than fulfilling their historic function of facilitating such mobility.

Kenneth B. Clark, "Alternative Public School Systems," Harvard Educational Review (Winter 1968), p. 101.

Quality of the City Public Schools

Aside from any inequalities among schools, the public schools in the city are too often perceived by families simply as inadequate. One only has to live in the city and talk with neighbors and community groups, especially people who are interested in public education and have deep commitment to it. Another surprising bit of evidence is the sacrifice a family of modest means will make to escape either by moving to the suburbs or by attending non-public schools. Protestant families will even send their children to Catholic schools to escape.

Some of the escape is pure racism, but others, black and white, far prefer the city to the dull homogeneity of that cultural wasteland called suburbia. The complaints of such people do not seem to be racially based. In fact, one common complaint is the lack of a viable school integration policy.

And then, of course, there is the steady stream of rhetoric, some of it quite scholarly and some not repeatable here, which decries--in various terms--the poor quality of public education in the city. Some well-known examples are Kenneth Clark's Dark Ghetto, Jonathan Kozol's Death at an Early Age, Peter Schrag's Village School Downtown, and Nat Hentoff's Our Children Are Dying. Unfortunately, it is hard to find a group of city clients who are very enthusiastic about singing the praises of their schools. In the words of the Federal Government's Urban Task Force: "Neither the white nor the minority communities have expressed indications that they are satisfied with the schools as they now are serving their children."

U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The Urban Task Force Report. Wilson Riles, Chairman (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

Alienation and Powerlessness

There is alienation and a feeling of powerlessness where city public schools are concerned. Clients don't know how to influence them. Some try but few would claim any success. Apathy is a general reaction to failure to exert influence and to a feeling of powerlessness.

This attitude inhibits a decent relationship between the school and its community. Few city schools enjoy the enthusiastic support of parents and children. Indeed, this is not surprising, inasmuch as many of the clients of the school are captive. They have little choice as to where they will send their children to school, and therefore find it easier to stand on the sidelines and criticize. They are caught like the students in a situation where they can do little about their situation. They do not have the

resources or the affluence to make a choice either to move to an area where there are "better" schools, or to choose a private school. Caught in such a situation, conflict is likely to arise to a degree which is dysfunctional and which can be relieved in many cases only by indifference and apathy on one hand, or by violent eruptions.

At present only relatively affluent parents retain effective control over the schooling of their children. Only they are free to move to school districts with better schools and higher tax structures; and, in the case of minority group parents, even affluence is not a sufficient attribute to the exercising of a choice.

It is true that, under present circumstances, parents who think their children are getting inferior schooling could take their complaints to the local school board or to the State legislature. If both were unresponsive, and the complainants were not citizens, they may eventually be the subject of a voter revolt. But it takes an enormous investment of time, energy and money to mount an effective campaign to change the local public schools. Any-one who has ever tried to bring about change in city schools can tell how much effort has gone in, and how little has resulted. In any event, we are talking about only the relatively few parents who have political skill or commitment to solve their problems in this way. As a result, effective control over the character of the city school system is vested primarily in the professional bureaucracy; secondly in the school board, particularly where issues become conflicts; and thirdly in the State, when lobby and pressure groups are strong enough to cause action.

Fantini and Weinstein perceptively said, "Many people question public institutions as to who serves whom. The verdict rendered most often is that in reality the client is at the service of the institution. Thus 'You can't fight City Hall' has become 'You can't fight the Board of Education.' As cogs in a gigantic machinery, administrators, teachers, children, and parents are rendered powerless in persistent ways."

Mario Fantini and Gerald Weinstein, Making Urban Schools Work (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 8

Bureaucracy and Centralization

Fourth, city school systems are often perceived as having the characteristics of centralized, inflexible bureaucracies, more intent on serving the members of the system than on serving the clients.

Fantini and Weinstein observed, "Within the urban school itself, depersonalization is dramatically evident. Class size has rarely been pared down, in spite of 'average' numbers issued in board of education reports . . . Teachers rarely live in the community in which they teach, and thus parents

and teachers are strangers. Because of the great numbers of children, cumulative records and reports in effect become the 'children' about whom stand-alone decisions are made. Personalizing education would mean fouling up the machinery of the organization and by all means the machinery comes before the individual or else we would have chaos."

Mario Fantini and Gerald Weinstein, Making Urban Schools Work (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), pp. 7-8.

Another characteristic of a bureaucracy is a tendency toward centralization. City school systems have simply become too big for many urban areas to be effectively managed, and they are too centralized to permit a wide variety of different approaches or to allow greatly different amounts of resources to be allocated among schools that might tend to equalize opportunities. This centralization has operated in ways that prevent very different programs from one school to another. It has bound local school administrators in a jungle of red tape which keeps them tied very closely to the central offices for purposes of rationalization. And it has resulted in a sameness of approaches relieved only by differences in pupils and neighborhoods reflected in schools served. In effect, our large urban systems often seem to have all the disadvantages of centralization and few of the advantages.

Such decentralization as now exists allows school principals to maintain petty principalities within the kingdom of the Board of Education in matters that make very little difference to the educational outcome for students. But principals are not permitted to exercise real authority in areas of the most important ingredients for educational achievement. A school principal in an inner city area who manages to keep his school cool and causes no problems for the central administration can have a great deal of autonomy in his administrative style and in dealing with the day-to-day administrative problems which come up. In other matters which might make more of a difference, such as selection and training of teachers, school attendance areas, curricular innovations, school entering and leaving age, change in governance of the local school, and innovations in teaching styles, the most change-oriented principals are in danger of being accused of rocking the boat and causing too many problems for the central administration.

Decentralization would include a new style of city school budget, giving each school wide discretion in spending funds allocated to it. Instead of assigning new teachers from the central office, the system could establish a talent pool from which each principal could pick his staff according to the needs and character of his school and community.

This is a time of great innovation, but very little change. Principals can try small projects, but real independence and autonomy cannot be permitted. One school can't be permitted to be outstanding because parents in other schools will put pressure on the administration to replicate

the success. Even so, new practices often suffer death by incorporation, or are so successful that they are phased out to other schools over the whole system, where they must operate without special resources or careful understanding, or the guidance of enthusiastic personnel. They become encrusted with standard operating procedures and develop hardening of the arteries to such an extent that they are indistinguishable from the rest of the program in the school. Except for the superintendents, large city administrators are commonly inbred. They tend to organize into informal or formal associations to protect the status quo.

Teachers in the large city systems are frequently found overloaded with forms and difficult children, isolated but not autonomous, looked down upon by the academic aristocracy of the universities and turning more and more into union members sacking protective working rules which stiffen already rigid school systems rather than becoming more and more professional. Increasingly these teachers act as pedagogical functionaries--civil service custodians of human cargo.

A rigid bureaucracy usually keeps itself free of outside contamination by tightly controlling the selection process of its leadership. Kenneth Clark asks whether the selection process involved in training and promoting educators and administrators for our public schools emphasizes qualities of passivity, conformity, caution, and smoothness rather than boldness, creativity and the ability to demand and obtain those things which are essential for solid and effective public education for all children. Clark concludes, pessimistically, that it does not seem likely that change will come from within the city public schools: "They seem to represent the most rigid forms of bureaucracies which, paradoxically, are most resilient in their ability and use of devices to resist rational or irrational demands for change."

Kenneth B. Clark, "Alte
ive Public School Systems,"
Harvard Educational Rev (Winter 1968), p. 109.

In sum, the city public schools are becoming, or have become, the haven of the poor and the black, caught in a system they cannot influence, unable to move because of racial discrimination or lack of resources, and unwilling to be quiet and suffer their poverty in obedient reverence.

If this seems harsh, your attention is invited to some of the literature, where the words will be more frank. Also keep in mind that this is an attempt at a description, not an accusation. As in the case of so many social problems, there is plenty of blame to go around, and we all share guilt if we have allowed our city schools to become what they are so generally perceived to have become.

The reader is also invited to think for a moment about families with school aged children in the urban area--say Allegheny County, for example--who have the money and the right color to choose their schools. How many of these families, white and affluent, have chosen the city public schools and how many have chosen either suburban schools or non-public schools?

Problems

Given the proposition that large city public schools are in deep trouble, the voucher system is not necessarily an answer. When asked what they thought about it, school board members polled by the American School Board Journal (October 1970) found many problems, even assuming the idea could be brought off legally:

- 1) a multitude of new schools would be formed at public expense;
- 2) public would support many existing racial and religious schools;
- 3) students would be placed according to prejudices of their parents;
- 4) school boards could never project in any accurate manner enrollments and the need for facilities, teachers, tests, instructional materials, equipment;
- 5) it would result in a fragmentation of our public effort to educate;
- 6) in today's society, the public school is probably the only place where the broad spectrum of children from different economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds can meet as equals;
- 7) private schools are not subject to the stringent state standards for staff, building and fiscal procedures that raise public school costs, i.e., unfair competition;
- 8) implementation would be a nightmare, e.g., matching students to schools;
- 9) it would mean more Federal Control;
- 10) would not close gap between rich and poor districts;
- 11) it raises whole question of fly-by-night diploma mills.

These are by no means all the problems one may wish to raise, but they are probably representative of the concerns of school board members.

Model of Public Education Voucher System

If we were to mount a pilot demonstration, what might it be; how would it look? We need a model in order to discuss a concept in as precise a manner as possible. Therefore, what follows is one model suggested for the purpose of making our discussion as meaningful as possible.

Let us assume that a city school board wished to engage in this pilot demonstration. It decided that the voucher system would be publicly managed on a trial basis for the public good. The Board of Education would become the Public Education Authority, issue vouchers and collect taxes, and State and Federal aid to pay for them. The voucher equals the local cost/pupil, say \$1000 per year, leaving aside for the moment capital costs and debt service.¹ The Public Education Authority, after an appropriate planning and public discussion period, communicates its plans to all schools and parents. It might work like this:

1. Parents register their children, if they desire a voucher, with the Authority, indicating a priority choice of preferred schools.
2. Schools desiring to participate agree to the Authority's ground rules:
 - a. Prepare a written description, as complete as possible in one printed page, for dissemination to parents and over mass media.
 - b. Agree to the maximum number of students per grade they can accept.
 - c. Agree to non-discrimination similar to present assurance used by Federal authorities responsible for effecting civil rights laws.
 - d. Agree to accept all applicants within reasonable criteria approved in advance by the Authority, e.g., a boys school could restrict applicants to boys. A school could also specialize if it makes clear in its description what that specialty is and accepts all applicants who agree that that specialty is worthwhile and desirable for the child, e.g., specializing in education of the handicapped, music, certain vocational programs, college preparation, Montessori education, etc. In this case, however, as opposed to the boys school case, the school could not refuse admission to an applicant who failed to demonstrate "aptitude" for this specialty.

¹The 1971 Public School Budget in Pittsburgh works out to about \$1000 per pupil. Capital costs and debt service would add about another \$100 per pupil, in round figures.

- e. Schools participating would at least meet all existing State laws and regulations which apply to private schools in such areas as facilities, safety, curricular offerings, days of attendance, teacher qualifications, and so forth.
- f. Schools with religious associations would agree that sectarian activity and subjects would be held outside of the regular program. Such activities could be mandatory for those families which desired to participate. Church services, prayers, Bible readings would be permitted to the extent they are presently permitted in public schools. Rules would be similar to those obtaining now where, for example, classes funded by Title I, ESEA are taught in non-public schools. The G. I. Bill of Rights may provide another precedent for dealing with the payment of public funds to church related institutions.
- g. Schools which were exactly filled by applicants designating that school as their firm choice would be closed to further admission and be ready to begin. Most schools, however, would have either more or fewer applicants than they agreed to accept. Where there were more applicants, the total number of first choices would be put into a hat and name cards drawn until the school became full. Where there were too few first choices to fill the school, spaces would be used by second and third choices, by those who didn't register, and by children who were assigned by the Authority for other reasons.
- h. Schools agree to accept the voucher in full payment of the educational program. No other payment would be necessary except as authorized by the Authority, e.g.; perhaps for a hot lunch, paper and pencil, etc. Any school may accept voluntary contributions, PTA donations, etc. as is true now.
- i. Schools agree to keep and make available reasonable fiscal and achievement records as determined by Authority guidelines for accountability in all schools.

*Such activities would not be supported by voucher funds.

Now there is the issue of capital expenditures. In this model, capital expenditures would be authorized by the Authority for former School Board schools only, based upon the following assumptions:

1. The system is designed to discourage capital expenditures for inadequately financed and planned private schools.
2. There are facilities in existence for bona fide schools to use, new or existing. Many parochial schools in the inner city, for example, are under utilized; and many large churches and synagogues have excellent educational buildings.
3. Existing public schools have large debt service needs.
4. The value of the voucher is set to include operation and maintenance costs.
5. Where there is an under supply of spaces, the Board schools have to take children. Every child has to go to some school, and that puts a special demand on Board schools.

Transportation is provided by the Authority, probably through the city public transit systems, under guidelines worked out regarding age of child, distance to be traveled and so forth.

The changes envisioned would be gradual. For example, children already attending a specific school would be able to continue in that school, if desired by the family, through the highest grade. Siblings would be able to go to school together. Thus two classes of students would have preferred status.

This would mean that in the case of some schools the change in student body would be gradual. However, it should be kept in mind that every year a new grade enters, and family mobility will take its toll.

Also, a private school can continue to accept tuition students as long as at least 10% of its spaces were available to voucher students.

There is always the problem of push-outs. Some schools, prevented from exercising much choice at the point of entry, may try to make amends for that by forcing withdrawal or expelling undesirable students after admission. This could be handled in a number of ways:

1. Apply the same ground rules for expulsion that obtain presently with public schools.

2. Make it financially costly to expel a student, e.g., his voucher or part of it may go with him.
3. Set up a procedure for public review of expulsion cases where the family is opposed to the expulsion of the student.

Special monies for classes of special students (Title I; Education of the Handicapped) would follow the child, as is generally the case now.

The former "public schools," now highly decentralized,¹ continue to operate under a public board of education.

¹For discussion of how a decentralized system may work, see S. M. Brownell, "Desirable Characteristics of Decentralized School Systems," Phi Delta Kappan (January 1971), p. 246. For a more decentralized system, the British, see Ronald King, Education, (London: Longmans, 1969), pp. 37-85.

Policy Issues

Who could establish new schools under this system? Some parents, of course, will always be interested enough to get together to create schools that reflect their particular perceptions. An example would be the Montessori schools. Groups who have come into being for other reasons, like the Urban League, may wish to start schools because they are dissatisfied with public schools. And then, of course, organizations that are partially or primarily educational in nature would start schools. Examples of such organizations would be churches and synagogues; YMCA's and YMHA's; colleges and universities which are already involved in education on the elementary and secondary level; labor unions which train their own apprentices in vocational education; and large industrial and commercial enterprises that may find it desirable, as they do in other countries, to be responsible for a portion of the secondary education of the youngster, particularly when it can closely be tied to the needs of industry. In addition, there will always be entrepreneurs who believe that they can teach children better and cheaper than the public schools, and who will now have an opportunity to prove their claims. Some examples of the latter group might be the General Learning Corporation, Xerox, IBM, or RCA.

Would the intrusion of such organizations into public education, in the above manner, be proper policy? What would be the results, in terms of the system, in terms of serving societal needs, and in terms of what the child learns? What sort of safeguards would the State or local Authority have to incorporate in order to protect children and families? Would these safeguards be different than those we now apply to private schools?

The policy issue of sending money to the private schools does not really seem germane; the issue is, rather, how much and how money gets there. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania already sends money to private schools (Act 109) as does the Federal Government under various disguises through the NDEA and ESEA authorizations.

The Issue of Decentralization

This issue will have to be solved in some manner. It has a great deal to do with the problems that face our city schools. The voucher system can be one way to address the problem. Decentralization, of course, is not going to cure all the problems of city education. It is only a structural approach to reform, and as such it may assist bureaucracies by helping them reach more human scale, by helping them become more open to change and more responsive to the communities served.

To the degree that decentralization will help the system be more receptive to change and more responsive, it will move toward accountability.

In a large educational system, particularly in a city system, one means of creating this flexibility and responsiveness to a wide variety of populations is through the dispersal of responsibility and authority for educational planning and control to points near the beneficiaries.

Would this be good policy? Dispersal of responsibility could mean even greater control of the system by the profession. Each school--and there may be hundreds of them--would be fairly autonomous. The central office could no longer decree that, for example, more black teachers should be hired in the schools, or that black awareness should be part of the curriculum of every city school. Decentralization implies a willingness to permit some things to go on that the school board or the general public may not like, e.g., a program of sex education in a particular school.

On the other hand, if decentralization is coupled with parental choice, a family that seriously disagrees with the program of one school can go to another and thus the need for a standard pablum-grade curriculum agreeable to all is not so evident.

Competition and Quality

Thirdly, a voucher system relies in principle upon competition. The idea is that, at least in part, the children will tend to go to the better schools and the schools that are seen as poor schools will have to improve or leave the scene. Now if the competition engendered by the voucher system does, indeed, tend to drive out the poorer schools and to cause waiting lists and expansion plans at better schools, then it must be counted a success--at least in that respect.

The issue, of course, is to determine "good" and "better" schools. In part this is answered by parents exercising market choice, just as Chevrolets exist by the millions where other makes have disappeared because of market choices.

However, it is not so simple. It is possible that Chevrolets are actually or potentially harmful in certain ways, and the public has a right to protect the buyer from those harmful attributes. At what point, though, is a school, popular though it may be, required to change or go out of business?

Alienation and Apathy

The more influence parents have over what happens to their children, the more responsible they are likely to be, and the less likely they are to project disappointments and failures to someone or something else.

In other words, the voucher should also be judged on the influence it appears to have on public apathy, alienation, and even opposition to the "public schools."

When parents have some degree of influence on their children's schooling, one would expect them to be more interested and more active in such schooling, and to support their children's school in its program. If the voucher system does not have this positive influence, it has to some extent failed.

Accountability

The issue of accountability is complicated by a degree of fuzziness that surrounds the word. Certainly teachers and schools are theoretically accountable now, ultimately to the public through the school board. The problem is that such accountability can be rarely exercised in any satisfactory way. District wide accountability, even if it existed would have little meaning to a parent whose child cannot read or find a job. Another policy issue is to what degree is that parent's plight the schools' responsibility, and by what procedures do you determine the responsibility?

Another issue is, who is accountable? The Teacher? The Principal? The Guidance Counselor? The Special Reading Teacher? The Director of Elementary Education? The Superintendent? Fixing accountability is likely to be a slippery practice. Any teacher organization that does not protect its membership from being held unfairly accountable, is not likely to last long. This is particularly true with respect to accountability in areas of complexity, such as the example given above. In the less meaningful, but simpler areas, such as hours of work per day, or hours of university credit earned in subject field, teachers can be held accountable, and to some extent are now.

It may be wiser to avoid placing accountability for such things as student performance so squarely and one might say so unfairly on the backs of the teachers. Could it be that the responsibility belongs in a number of places:

on the public, on the school, the parents, the children and the teachers.

A parent who has a choice of schools to which he can send his child, and who has carefully reviewed the offerings of these schools, and has carefully made a selection using his best judgment, puts a degree of faith in that school and in his judgment. Would such a parent be less likely to quickly blame the school or the teacher for any disappointment that may arise? Could a well-designed and well-run voucher system place primary responsibility for educational quality squarely on the shoulders of parents, students, teachers and local school administrators? If so, the system merits our consideration.

Innovation and Experimentation.

Would the voucher system encourage innovation and experimentation? Would significantly different alternatives be available to clients, both in the direction of more conservative and more progressive education? Would a climate be established which permitted different approaches and encourage the trial application of promising new ideas?

The voucher system has to encourage and permit the establishment of new schools, perhaps in old facilities, but schools that are new in ideas, so that the range of alternatives available to parents would be great enough to give the system a fair chance. If a voucher system does not permit and even encourage a wide variety of educational alternatives, some of them quite innovative, then it has failed in one of its major purposes.

Equality of Educational Opportunity

The major policy issue with respect to vouchers is equality of educational opportunity. Unless the system has a positive effect on equality, it will not succeed, for the lack of such equality is both the major problem and the glorious promise of American democracy. Our tradition our laws and our courts have historically searched for new meanings for equality of opportunity--in movements to repeal property qualifications for voters, to remove the curse of slavery, to enfranchise women, and to tear down the educational, occupational and residential barriers that had been thrown up against minorities.

This goal of equality of opportunity, the absence of which has influenced the thinking on public education so powerfully over the last decades, is not going to be sacrificed to Milton Friedman's concept of the way the free market place should operate. That is a policy.

Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom (Chicago: University of Chicago, Press, 1962), pp. 85-98

issue which has been decided. There are policy issues, however, surrounding the proper manner of increasing equality of educational opportunity, and research issues regarding the proper criteria and measurement of progress toward the goal. For example, if genuine choice exists in a pilot trial of the voucher system, and families freely choose schools in such a way that Whites and Blacks attend schools that are even more racially segregated than at present, what would one say about the success of the pilot trial? To complicate matters further, what would we conclude if the trial showed that racial integration improved somewhat because families neatly sorted themselves by social class, and the social class homogeneity of schools was greater than it ever existed before?

In sum, would we allow parents a free choice, even if the exercise of such choice may be inimical to other social policies?

What is a "Good" School?

There are a great many issues, of course, and this paper cannot address all of them. But the issue of what is a good school is particularly controversial. Who determines what a good school is? If parents decide, do they have the information necessary to make informed decisions or will they decide to send their children to the nearest, most convenient school?

Some have proposed that the public authority decide on the basis of tests which schools are doing the best job, and then provide the information to the public. This, of course, raises a host of research and public policy issues, in addition to the issue of practicality.

In the model suggested above, schools are required to inform parents about school purposes and programs, and

parents are expected to make decisions on the basis of such information plus all the other information or misinformation available. Of course, interested parents will tend to seek reliable information from many sources. Nevertheless, it is the assumption of the voucher system that parents are able to make decisions about the schooling of their children. Parents define what a good school is, with inputs from public information, from children, from teachers, and from others they ask. This is an assumption which is quite critical to the model, but one you may not accept.

Summary

This paper has tried to examine the educational voucher system in a critical and unbiased way; to make some assessment of how it would affect some of the current problems and issues in urban education; and to project how the voucher system might work under the guidance of a public school system.

The paper raises the possibility that the concept of educational vouchers is not incompatible with public education in the city and, indeed, may enable the city schools to become more human in scale, more open and responsive to clients, and more effective in the effort to enlarge the practice of equality of educational opportunity. If all this could be the result of the voucher system, a pilot demonstration ought to be tried and evaluated to determine whether such results would indeed be clearly apparent.

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